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AUTHOR Griggs, Shirley A.
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ABSTRACT

The challenge for schools today is to assess the learning style characteristics of each student and to provide teaching and counseling interventions that are compatible with those characteristics. The counselor's role is major--both as a consultant to teachers and as a provider of counseling services. This digest discusses learning style models, diagnosing learning styles, matching learning style preference with appropriate counseling techniques, and the need for counselors to become skilled in consultation with teachers. Counselors across the nation who have implemented learning style approaches have reported positive changes in students' academic achievement and attitudes toward school as a result. (ABL)

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Learning Styles Counseling

Shirley A. Griggs

Overview

Increasingly, educational leaders are recognizing that the process of learning is critically important and understanding the way individuals learn is the key to educational improvement. The shortcomings of education in general have been addressed in *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and *An Imperiled Generation: Saving Urban Schools* (Carnegie Foundation, 1988). Evidence abounds that the educational establishment in the United States is comparatively behind that of selected Western European and Asian nations in teaching youth the knowledge base and skills necessary to compete in a highly technical era. The challenge for our schools today is to assess the learning style characteristics of *each* student and to provide teaching and counseling interventions that are compatible with those characteristics. The counselor's role in learning styles is major—both as a consultant to teachers and as a provider of counseling services.

What is Learning Style?

Everyone has a learning style. Our style of learning, if accommodated, can result in improved attitudes toward learning and an increase in productivity, academic achievement, and creativity.

A comprehensive definition of learning style was adopted by a national task force, comprised of leading theorists in the field and sponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. This group defined "learning styles" as the composite of characteristic cognitive, affective, and physiological factors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how a learner perceives, interacts with, and responds to the learning environment (Keefe, 1979). Included in this comprehensive definition are "cognitive styles," which are intrinsic information-processing patterns that represent a person's typical mode of perceiving, thinking, remembering, and problem-solving.

Learning Style Models

In an attempt to provide a framework for the growing number of different learning style theories, Curry (1987) conceived the "onion model," consisting of four layers defined as follows:

Personality dimensions assess the influences of basic personality on preferred approaches to acquiring and integrating information. Models stressing personality include Witkin's (1954) construct of field dependence/field independence and the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (Myers, 1978) with dichotomous scales measuring extroversion versus introversion, sensing versus intuition, thinking versus feeling, and judging versus perception.

Information-processing is the individual's preferred intellectual approach to assimilating information, and includes Schmeck's (1983) construct of cognitive complexity and Kolb's (1984) model of information processing.

Social interaction addresses how students interact in the classroom and includes Reichmann's and Grasha's (1974) types of learners: independent, dependent, collaborative, competitive, participant, and avoidant.

Multidimensional and instructional preference address the individual's preferred environment for learning and encompass the Human Information Processing Model (Keefe, 1989) and Learning Style Model of Dunn and Dunn (1978). These models are similar because they stress the importance of identifying and addressing *individual differences* in the learning process. However, there are important differences among the models in that some models stress accommodation of individual style preferences while others stress flexibility and adaptation, and there is a range of quality among the assessment instruments that operationalize the various models and lack of a research base for some of the models.

The Dunn and Dunn (1978) model was selected for the application of learning styles to the counseling process, because it is a multidimensional model with reliable and valid instrumentation and a strong research base.

Diagnosing Learning Styles

Three instruments assess learning style. *The Learning Style Inventory—Primary Version* (Perrin, 1981) for children in kindergarten through grade two is a pictorial questionnaire; *The Learning Style Inventory* (LSI) (Dunn, Dunn, & Price, 1985) for youth in grades 3-12 is a 104-item self-report questionnaire that identifies 22 elements relating to the environmental, emotional, sociological, physical, and psychological preferences of the individual; and the *Productivity Environmental Preference Survey* (Dunn, Dunn, & Price, 1982) for adults is a 100-item self-report questionnaire that identifies individual adults' preferences for conditions in a working and learning environment.

Diagnosing and interpreting learning styles provide data as to how individuals perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment. A knowledge of our own learning style makes us aware of counseling interventions that we tend to favor over others, thus accommodating some counselee whose styles are similar to our own and possibly alienating others whose styles are dissimilar. The starting point in teaching and counseling is to respond to the learning style needs of students, which implies knowledge of our own preferences and a conscious effort to expand our repertoire of counseling interventions and techniques to respond to student diversity.

Learning Styles Counseling

The counselor's role is a comprehensive one, involving: (1) individual and group counseling, which are primarily learning processes, (2) coordinating programs in career education, psychological education, tutoring, peer helping, and skill development in

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communication, conflict resolution, problem solving, decision making, and time management and studying, and (3) consulting with classroom teachers to create a learning style environment that is flexible and responsive to a broad range of learning styles preferences.

Learning styles counseling involves the following steps:

- Assessing the developmental needs of students, psychosocial crises, and developmental tasks that are stage-related, and the special needs of groups, such as bilingual/bicultural students, and gifted and talented students.
- Developing a comprehensive, developmental counseling program based upon the needs assessment.
- Assessing the individual learning styles of students, counselors, and teachers and counseling students to help them develop an understanding of their learning style preferences.
- Planning teaching and counseling interventions that are compatible with the learning style needs of students.
- Evaluating teaching and counseling outcomes to determine the extent to which program objectives and counseling goals have been achieved.

Matching Learning Style Preference With Appropriate Counseling Techniques

The profile of each of the students who takes the *Learning Style Inventory*, will provide data in the following areas:

- **Environmental:** bright versus dim light; sound present or absent; warm versus cool temperature; formal versus informal design.
- **Emotional:** high versus low structure; low versus high level of persistence, motivation; and responsibility versus nonconformity.
- **Sociological:** preference for learning alone; in pairs; with adults, peers, team, or varied.
- **Physical:** auditory, visual, tactual, or kinesthetic perceptual strengths; high versus low mobility; and time of day preferences.
- **Psychological:** global versus analytic; impulsive versus reflective; cerebral dominance.

Additional counseling techniques, such as art therapy, bibliotherapy, mime, musical improvisation, and mutual storytelling with children, and compatible learning style preferences are discussed in *Learning Styles Counseling* (Griggs, 1991).

Consulting With Classroom Teachers

School counselors need to become skilled in consultation models and techniques, because they are perceived by educational professionals as particularly knowledgeable in learning theory and processes. The counselor is committed to humanizing educational systems, enhancing the school climate, and providing for individual differences to develop the potential and uniqueness of each student. Administrators and curriculum specialists consult with counselors, because they are knowledgeable concerning students' and parents' complaints about classes, teaching methods, course requirements, and grading practices. The experienced counselor is able to identify patterns in these complaints, e.g. teaching methods that are rigid, monotonous or unchallenging; or teaching styles that accommodate a limited number of learning styles, such as the use of lecture and discussion exclusively.

Classrooms and curriculum strategies need to be redesigned to accommodate the variety of learning style preferences of students.

Summary

School counselors across the nation have implemented learning style approaches in counseling and consulting with teachers, and they have reported positive changes in students' academic achievement and attitudes toward school as a result (Griggs, 1991).

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Shirley A. Griggs, Ed.D., is a Professor of Counselor Education at St. John's University in Jamaica, New York.

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